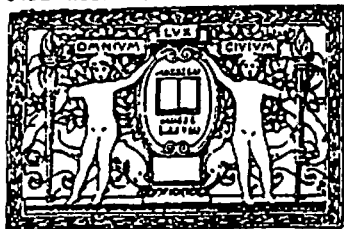


Social life and customs

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CABL ADDRESS, "DARTMOUTH BOSTON"



Boston Public Library

Boston, Massachusetts 02117

2 May 1992

The Rev. James E. Williamson (ret)
Duxbury Council on Aging
Duxbury Town Hall
Duxbury, Massachusetts
02332

Dear Mr. Williamson:

Ref.: Your letter of 2 April 1992.

I have enclosed photocopies of three general articles on the Boston Post Canes. There was also a general article by Tim Clark entitled "Keepers of the Cane" in Yankee Magazine, vol. 47, no. 2 (March, 1983), pp. 190-197. You should be able to see a copy of this article in the Duxbury Public Library or another nearby library.

Although 431 canes were distributed in 1909 other towns and cities were later added to the list bringing the total to roughly 700 canes. The canes were distributed in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, i.e. the readership area of The Boston Post. I have not seen any references to canes going to Vermont or Connecticut.

The first cane sent to Duxbury in 1909 went to eighty-nine year old Captain Josephus Dawes. I do not know how long he held the cane nor anything about subsequent cane holders.

Perhaps the most knowledgeable person concerning The Boston Post canes is now Mr. James J. Buckley. 22 Whip O Will Lane, Milford, MA 01757 (Tel. no. 508-473-6068). Mr. Buckley may have specific information of interest to you. He has been most cooperative with our Library and has furnished us with numerous of his articles on this subject.

Very sincerely yours,

Edwin G. Sanford
Edwin G. Sanford
Coordinator of
Social Sciences

YESTERDAYS

Staff of Long Life

by Barbara Staples

It's just a walking stick - a cane, black with an ornate gold tip, but in the Seacoast it commands admiration, pride and respect. And it's steeped in tradition.

The Boston Post Cane was the brain child of Edwin Atkins Grozier, publisher and editor of the *Boston Post* newspaper. Purchasing the near-bankrupt paper in 1891, Grozier developed the idea of the Boston Post Cane as one of his many attempts to increase the newspaper's circulation.

He had bid on an unclaimed shipment of gold-headed ebony canes and on August 2, 1909, he sent a letter to the selectmen of approximately 700 communities. In the letter, he explained:

The canes were made by a leading manufacturer of canes, J.F. Fradley & Company of New York. It was of gahoon ebony from the African Congo. The head of the cane was rolled gold of hand and inscribed: Presented by the *Boston Post* to the Oldest Citizen of (Town). To be transmitted.

Grozier asked each Board of Selectmen "to act as trustee to see that the stick be duly presented and duly transmitted when a change of holders became necessary."

However, what originally seemed to be a straightforward gesture was not without problems. The cane awards have endured almost a century as objects of covetousness and controversy.

The canes have been fought over, against and about. Cane recipients have been benign, bothered and bewildered. Some potential recipients have been turned away when they could not produce proper birth certificates; one man refused to give up the cane when he moved out of town and it was not recovered until after his death.

Although on some occasions a heated confrontation took place when more than one person laid claim to the award, the gold-headed ebony canes have not always been welcome. Several women have turned down the cane because they didn't want their age revealed. A few 90-year-olds turned down the cane claiming they were "too busy." One town reported they tried to give the cane to a man who exclaimed, "Take that damn thing out of here, it's for old men and I'm just a young fellow."

of Amesbury received his cane on August 6, 1909, but returned it five days later when he learned it was only loaned to him. Osgood adamantly refused to be "custodian of it for a Boston newspaper."

From the beginning, the *Boston Post* stated the canes "are intended as a tribute to honored and useful lives, to thrift, temperance and right living, and above all to the superb vigor of New England manhood."



Men had always been cane recipients. That is until the 1940's, when women throughout the Seacoast exercised their 14th Amendment rights and "raised ructions," vigorously protesting that the award should not be given to men. They successfully demonstrated that the head of the cane specifically stated it was to be presented to the "oldest citizen."

Many Seacoast towns are still carrying on the tradition of the cane. Some of the present holders are Elizabeth Mathes, 101-years-old, of Newmarket; 99-year-old Maude Holt of Hampton; Barnet Schaeffer, 90, of Raymond; Georgia Brown of Fremont; Arvilla Randell of Lebanon; and Margaret Belmore of North Berwick.

The Town of Durham believes their first recipient was True W. Lovering, a Civil War veteran. Durham's present holder of the cane is John Shumacker, age 97.

Newton and Lee are preparing to present two new recipients with an

returned her cane, saying she has held it long enough and wants someone else to enjoy it.

Several Seacoast towns such as Berwick, Kittery, Greenland, Rollinsford, Seabrook, Rye, Stratham and New Castle are presently attempting to determine their oldest citizens. But while some towns try to find their oldest resident, other communities are still trying to locate their canes. Through the years, several canes have become lost or misplaced, including those distributed to Barrington, Epping, Exeter, Kingston, Kennebunkport, Newfields, Sanford and Salisbury.

A few Seacoast towns have given up the tradition of distributing the canes altogether. Amesbury, York and Hampstead, who lost its cane for several years and found it in Connecticut, no longer participate in the 80-year-old ceremony. The Town of Wells has placed its cane in the hands of the Wells-Ogunquit Historical Society. Hampton and Brentwood display their canes in the town halls.

Some Seacoast towns have chosen to keep their canes on display and instead present an alternative award to their oldest citizen. The Town of Newbury gives a replica cane made of stained wood with a sterling silver tip, while other towns have opted to award certificates. Some say it is for the safety of the valued gold-tipped cane, but others claim it is because there is superstition among the elders that the cane hastens one's demise.

There is no accurate distribution list of the 700 towns in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont, which received the Post Cane. However, Eleanor Burns of Northwood, New Hampshire has researched the Post Cane's history for nine years and can account for 440 canes. It is known, says Burns, that over 100 cities in towns in New Hampshire did receive a cane. Out of the 49 communities surveyed in the Seacoast Region, 39 towns received a Boston Post Cane, nine have been lost and 30 canes still survive.

The *Boston Post* made its last press run on October 4, 1956, after 125 years of publication. The paper may be gone, yet its legacy, the Boston Post Cane, is now celebrating its 80th birthday. The

Do you have a Boston Post cane?

Newspaper promotion outlives its creator

By Roy Whitcomb

One of America's most enduring newspaper promotions has outlasted its origins and taken on a life of its own.

The *Boston Post* canes — there were at least 400 of them — were given to every New England town's oldest resident by publisher Edward A. Grozier in 1909.

Made of gaboon ebony — one of Africa's finest woods — capped with engraved, 24-karat rolled gold, the cane promotion had the style and class so easily accepted by New Englanders for several reasons:

- One was sent to each town and city council with instructions to deliver it to the oldest resident. Of course, he would also be a citizen of good station, and properly revered.

- It was made of the finest materials available, and included the name of the town or city on its engraved head. It was also made by the widely-known J.F. Fradley and Co. of New York.

- And, it was free.

The cane promotion generated story after story for the *Boston Post* as each community sought out its oldest citizen, and in later years local newspapers picked up the stories as the cane was often ceremoniously presented to the new "oldest citizen" upon the demise of the original keeper of the cane.

During the early part of this century Grozier's newspaper was to become the largest circulating non-tabloid paper in the nation, but in the mid-20s Grozier died, and while his heirs tried to follow his dynamic lead, they could not.

By the end of World War II the paper was failing and in 1956, after a series of financial losses and the growth of competing newspapers, the paper folded.

But the Boston Post Cane found an indelible niche in the legends of small New England towns.

As Grozier wrote when he delivered the canes to the town fathers, the canes "will present an interesting galaxy of the vigor and longevity of New England manhood."

In one special way he was wrong. By 1934, the pressure of social

change caused the newspaper to amend its instruction and asked that the cane be presented "to the oldest person," thus permitting officials to present it to women as well.

Recent publicity about the canes has come from the pages of *Yankee Magazine*, a widely distributed New England journal of folklore and country features, and the little-known Bay State Historical League Bulletin of Massachusetts.

And just last month a Maine selectman, rummaging through a dusty closet at town hall, found another cane.

Norman Whitzell of Randolph has put out a call to the community to find the cane's rightful owner — Randolph's oldest citizen.

Eleanor Burns, a Dorchester, Mass., historian who claims four members of her family have "kept" the cane for various periods of time, has made the whereabouts of the canes a lifetime avocation.

Presently she knows the location of 400 canes, and the names of towns that have lost their canes. Women hold 182, men 74 and 112 are in "safe keeping" at town halls or in historical societies. Three have been known to be destroyed by fire. Two are owned by people who refuse to give them up, and 27 towns had canes but now say they are lost.

Tim Clark, writing in *Yankee Magazine*, claims it's not surprising the promotion outlasted the newspaper.

"Grozier may not have been aware of it," he writes, "but he tapped into a vein of ritual and superstition as old as humanity."

"The cane, or staff, is an ancient symbol of deference to age and reverence for ancestors. It is a fertility symbol as well; the passage of a sacred staff from the oldest member of a group to the next upon the first one's death is a way of defeating death. 'The King is dead. Long live the King!'

"It is no more surprising that such a powerful piece of magic should become invested with superstitions. In some towns, as years went by, people came to believe the cane was hexed. Residents who were hale when they received it were said to wither suddenly and die. In many

towns the oldest resident refused to accept the cane."

It took a Maynard, Mass., resident, curious about the cane's whereabouts, ten years to find it. He finally did . . . in the closet of a nephew's home who accidentally found it.

Every so often another cane surfaces. By now there are some who have no idea what to do with it because they don't remember, or never knew about, the *Boston Post*. Presumably these people have tossed them away along with a piece of newspaper history.

THE BOSTON POST GOLD-HEADED CANES: ORIGINS OF A TRADITION

Ross W. Beales, Jr.

In 1909 Edwin A. Grozier, editor and publisher of the *Boston Post*, distributed gold-headed canes to chairmen of boards of selectmen in 700 New England towns, asking that the canes be presented to the oldest citizen of each town and thereafter be transmitted to successive oldest citizens. Thus began a tradition which has persisted in some communities for nearly three-quarters of a century.

Over the years, however, the tradition of the gold-headed cane has lapsed in some, if not many towns. The reasons for the lapse may be easily imagined, for they were inherent in the process of transmission and in the very longevity which the gold-headed canes were created to honor. The holder of a cane could not, of course, present the cane to his successor, although he might ask relatives or friends to return the cane to the selectmen upon his death. Some holders of the cane may have moved, while others, with advancing age and infirmities, may have put the cane in a closet or attic where it would be forgotten or lost. At the death of the oldest citizen, relatives might understandably have overlooked the cane or have been unaware of the informal provisions for its transmission. In addition, as towns grew in size and as the responsibilities and membership of boards of selectmen changed, the tradition may have been put aside in the face of the formal and certainly more important business of town



Photo Credit: Joel R. Villa, College of the Holy Cross

government. So, too, the oldest citizens may well have outlived the selectmen or at least the selectmen's political lives. Finally, with the demise of the *Boston Post*, which ceased publication in 1956, the original source of the tradition disappeared.

Information about the origins of the gold-headed canes has not been widely or accurately available. Thus, various sources give the years 1899 or 1906, rather than 1909, as the date when the tradition began, while the number of canes has been placed at

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The Bay State Historical League Bulletin,

431 or 692, not 700. Printed below is the *Post's* 18 August 1909 article on the gold-headed canes, including Mr. Grozier's letter to the chairmen and a description of the cane. The article will serve, it is hoped, as a source of information about the tradition for communities which are seeking to revive or maintain the tradition. The article also provides a starting point for individuals who wish to search town records or local newspapers in order to identify the first holder of the cane in their community and trace the transmission of the cane from oldest citizen down to the present.

Boston Post, 18 August 1909

The Boston Post recently forwarded to the chairmen of each of 700 New England towns a fine Gaboon ebony cane with gold head, with the request that it be presented with the compliments of the Boston Post to the Oldest Citizen of the town.

A great deal of interest has been aroused all over New England by this presentation. Almost without exception the Selectmen of the various towns have expressed their cordial approval of the idea, and have very willingly accepted the informal trust.

In many towns the Post cane has already been presented to the Oldest Citizen, the occasion in numerous instances being marked by a special gathering and the presentation being publicly made.

In a few instances there has been some doubt as to who was entitled to the cane. After a little investigation the problem has usually been solved by the Selectmen, who from their familiarity with the citizens of their town were naturally in the best position to determine the matter.

The inscription on the head of each cane is as follows:

PRESENTED
BY THE BOSTON POST
TO THE
OLDEST CITIZEN OF

.....
(To be transmitted.)

The letter to the chairmen of the Selectmen was as follows:

Dear Sir — We take the liberty of requesting of you and other members of the Board of Selectmen of your town a little favor, which we trust you may be able to grant.

The Boston Post desires to present, with its compliments, to the Oldest Citizen of your town, a gold-headed cane, and as you are doubtless well informed as to the citizens of your town, we ask that you make the selection and presentation.

The cane is a fine one, manufactured especially for this purpose by J. F. Fradley & Co. of New York, who are generally



Photo Credit: Joel R. Villa, College of the Holy Cross

recognized as the leading manufacturers of fine canes in this country. The stick is of carefully selected Gaboon ebony from the Congo, Africa, and the head is made of rolled gold of 14-karat fineness.

The head of the cane is artistically engraved as presented by the Boston Post to the Oldest Citizen of your town (to be transmitted). The idea is that the cane shall always be owned and carried by the Oldest Citizen of your town, and that upon the decease of the present Oldest Citizen it shall be duly transmitted to the then Oldest Citizen, remaining always in the possession of whoever is the Oldest Citizen of your town. Upon the head of the cane a blank space has been left where

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the name of the owner may be engraved locally, if desired.

We request that in an informal way your board act as trustee of the cane, and see that the stick is duly presented and duly transmitted when such a change of holders becomes necessary. We do not suggest any formal trust or any legal or financial responsibility on your part, but simply that you act in the matter in accordance with the plan outlined as your best judgment indicates. There is no charge whatever by the Post to your board or to the holder of the cane.

In case your board will undertake to act for us, as suggested, we would request that you notify us to that effect, a directed envelope being inclosed.

We also inclose a blank, leaving space for data as to the holder of the cane, and requesting that at your convenience, after the cane is presented, you will fill it out and forward to Gold Cane Department, the Boston Post, to be filed in our archives. We would also be pleased to receive a photograph of the citizen to whom you may award the cane, with his name and address written upon the back. We are sending similar canes to various other towns, and as opportunity serves it is our purpose to publish some of these sketches and photographs.

A description of the cane is also inclosed, explaining the method of its manufacture and presentation, which we would be pleased to have you hand to your local paper for publication, if deemed worthy. It is possible that there may be sufficient interest in this matter to make the presentation of the cane an occasion for an informal meeting of the friends of the recipient. This lies of course wholly within your discretion.

We are forwarding the cane, express paid, to your address. If for any reason you are unable to act for us in this matter, kindly notify us at once and hold the cane until we may be able to make other arrangements for its presentation.

Trusting, however, that you may favor us by acting as requested,

We beg to remain,

Very respectfully yours,
BOSTON POST.

By E. A. GROZIER.

Description of the Cane

The cane is a splendid specimen of such manufacture. It is made by J. F. Fradley & Co. of New York, who are widely recognized as the leading manufacturers of fine canes. The materials used in the Boston Post cane are the best obtainable. The sticks are of Gaboon ebony from the Congo, Africa. They are shipped to this country in logs, about seven feet long, and then cut into stick lengths. They are allowed to dry for six months, so they will be thoroughly seasoned. After this they are carefully examined, and all cracked, warped or otherwise imperfect sticks are discarded. The perfect ones are then turned to the desired sizes on a lathe, and allowed about three months for further drying. They are given a coat of shellac and rubbed down with pumice, coated with the finest quality of French varnish and then polished by hand with very fine pumice and oil. It takes about a year from the time the ebony logs are cut to produce a perfect stick.

The gold in the heads of the Post canes is of 14-karat fineness. It is rolled into sheets, cut to the desired size and soldered in a conical tube, then placed in a sectional steel chuck or form, which admits of its being drawn into the exact shape of the finished head. The tops are first cut into discs, and then soldered to the cane after it has been shaped. They are then filled with a hard composition and "chased," or ornamented, by hand, after which this composition filling is removed and they are sent to the polishing room for final finishing.

The Boston Post cane is not merely an ornamental cane. It is designed for every day usage and will last for many years.

The following blank was inclosed with the correspondence:

THE BOSTON POST CANE

Town of
State
Name of oldest citizen
Age Place of birth
How long a citizen
Family
Date of cane presentation

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INCIDENTS IN LIFE OF OLDEST CITIZEN

Please state here anything in the life of the Oldest Citizen that might be of interest. Offices held, if any. Societies? G.A.R. record? Health and habits? **ESPECIALLY TO WHAT DOES HE ATTRIBUTE HIS LONGEVITY?**

(Please fill out and forward to Gold Cane Department, The Boston Post, for filing in its archives. If convenient, a photograph, with name and address of oldest citizen written upon the back, would also be appreciated.)

A large number of reports have already been received. From time to time, as opportunity serves, the Post proposes to publish in its daily and Sunday editions some of the photographs of the venerable men, who now possess the Post cane. They will present an interesting galaxy of the vigor and longevity of New England manhood.

Ross Beales is president of the Holden Historical Society and associate professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross. He wishes to thank Mr. Edwin G. Sanford, social science reference librarian at the Boston Public Library, whose file on the gold-headed canes provided information about the tradition and the clues needed to locate the article in the Boston Post of 18 August 1909. He is also grateful to Mrs. Irene T. Amsden, town clerk of Rutland, Massachusetts, who provided additional information.

NOTE: Readers seeking more information on the Boston Post canes are referred to the "Keepers of the Cane," by Tim Clark in the March 1983 issue of Yankee.

